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## Daniel Fromson: Beer, like they used to make it



Dogfish Head Ta Henket label (dogfish)

By Daniel Fromson

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Like scientists set on reviving extinct species, today's craft brewers are possessed by a certain madness. They are re-creating steinbiers scalded with hot stones and ancient Scottish ales brewed with herbs. They are making modern interpretations of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin's personal recipes. Researchers have even analyzed a 19th-century beer from a Baltic Sea shipwreck so that it, too, may be brewed once again.

Then there are what might be the best-known historic beers: the widely available Ancient Ales from Dogfish Head Craft Brewery, including the Midas Touch, based on ingredients found in the 2,700-year-old tomb believed to have belonged to King Midas; and Theobroma, inspired by chemical analysis of a Central American fermented chocolate drink from 1200 B.C. Dogfish Head will release its next installment, the ancient-Egyptian-style Ta Henket, on Monday — the latest example of one of the beer world's most enduring and romantic trends.

"There's really a growing interest in re-creations — huge interest, I think," says Patrick McGovern, a biomolecular archaeologist at the University of Pennsylvania Museum who has conducted the scientific and historical research behind the Ancient Ales. Although he has an exclusivity agreement with Dogfish Head, he estimates that the number of brewers asking

him to collaborate on re-creations has doubled or tripled within the past six months. He says he has even been approached by beer-industry giants, including MillerCoors.

Of course, re-creations of historic beers are as old as the craft beer movement itself. Many of America's best-loved styles, such as saisons, hefeweizens and imperial stouts, were once on the brink of disappearing, and many were saved by breweries that championed them. During the 1970s and '80s, for example, San Francisco's Anchor Brewing revived interest in not only California steam beers but also chocolate- and coffee-flavored porters, which brewers had largely cast aside.

Nowadays, ever-more-obscure styles are reappearing with increasing frequency, from Polish smoked-wheat beers to the English strong ales known as Burtons. Among the more prominent examples: the ancient Scottish beers resurrected by the Scotland-based Williams Brothers Brewing; the Ales of the Revolution series from Philadelphia's Yards Brewing, including Thomas Jefferson's Tavern Ale and Poor Richard's Tavern Spruce Ale; and the early British recipes dredged up by beer blogger Ron Pattinson, who has collaborated with the Boston area's Pretty Things Beer and Ale Project and Brouwerij de Molen of the Netherlands.

The obscurity of the beers hasn't dulled the drama of the phenomenon. Brewers now probe history books for beers in need of rescuing and crisscross the globe to research forgotten recipes. That might sound like overstatement, if not for one key detail: Beer re-creations have proved to be great fodder for reality TV.

Dogfish Head's quest to make Ta Henket, for example, was portrayed last December in an episode of the Discovery Channel show "Brew Masters." Also on Discovery Channel, the special "How Beer Saved the World" depicted the replication by Atlanta's SweetWater Brewing of an ancient Nubian brewing technique. History Channel countered with its own "History on Tap," in which home-brewers were given the task of re-creating beers in the style of those brewed by colonial America's Pilgrims.

In "Brew Masters," McGovern and Dogfish Head President Sam Calagione traveled to a date farm on the outskirts of Cairo and set rotten dates in sterile plastic trays to ensnare wild Egyptian yeasts. (A Belgian lab later isolated and mapped the DNA of the strain that Calagione eventually used in Ta Henket.) Then there was the obligatory Anthony Bourdain-style stroll through the bazaar, where Calagione and McGovern selected historically significant ingredients for the beer: chamomile; the fruit of the doum palm; and zaatar, a blend of herbs that sometimes contains thyme and savory, which McGovern had identified in wine residues dating from about 3150 B.C.

"The story is critical because it's what differentiates a beer from any other beer," Calagione told me. Still, he added, "just because you hear of some creepy group of Norwegians that 300 years ago put the blood of virgins into beer doesn't mean you should replicate it. You have to have a story, but can you have a story and also make a world-class beer?"

The answer appears to be yes. De Molen's SSS triple stout, a re-creation of a version of the extinct style brewed in London on July 8, 1914, was like thick coffee with notes of caramel and whiskey. Norwegian Wood, from Norway's HaandBryggeriet, wasn't brewed with blood. Instead, with its understated smokiness and hints of spice, it recalled the country's

wood-smoke-scented farmhouse ales, which died out in the 1800s.

In a way that other drinks often don't, these beers explicitly convey the distinctive tastes of distinctive pasts. "I can write stuff and bang on about, 'Oh, the beers were very different back then,' but people don't listen very well," says Pattinson, who is now trying to bring back Scottish India pale ales. "If you give them a bottle of something to drink, they'll understand."

It's not just the general public he's trying to satisfy, though. "The main reason I do any of this is because I want to taste the beers," Pattinson says. "You look at all of these dusty old brewing logs, it gives you a bit of a thirst."

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